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A Letter To Montana Sportsmen

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Montana Fish and Game Department

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Information Bulletin Number 4

Dear Montana Sportsman:

In our recent contacts you have asked many questions about the Montana Fish and Game Department's big game management program. Most of these questions should be answered below.

1. Big game season recommendations by department personnel are based primarily upon three considerations: (1) the condition of the game food supply on winter ranges, (2) the trend in game population numbers, and (3) the trend in the numbers harvested by hunters. The Montana Fish and Game Department employs a staff of technically trained men to obtain this information.

2. The condition of a food supply is measured each year after game has left its winter range. This enables game managers to determine if the previous year's season was adequate in keeping the animals in balance with their food supply. It also provides a reliable basis for recommending the type of season needed for the coming fall.

3. Trends in game numbers are determined by a variety of methods. Ratio counts of the number of young per 100 adults measure year to year changes in herd productivity. Pellet group counts on sample plots are used to measure year to year changes in the relative numbers of animals using a range. If aerial counts of elk can be made under similar conditions each year they also provide an index of population trends. Year to year trends in game numbers are correlated with game food conditions to determine the effects of management practices.

4. The number of game animals harvested each year is determined from checking station records and a statewide hunter questionnaire. Year to year comparisons of the number of animals harvested also enable game managers to determine the effects of management practices.

5. Elk and deer herds in Montana's mountainous areas migrate considerable distances between high elevation summer ranges and foothill winter ranges. The size of a winter range area may be less than one-tenth of the total area occupied by a big game herd during the summer.

6. Hunting season dates are set so that game will be hunted when it is widely scattered on its summer range during the first part of the season. This is done to provide a sporting type of hunt for those who like to be in the field when game has a greater chance to elude the hunter.

7. The chances of harvesting a big game animal are greater during the latter part of the hunting season when fall storms provide a tracking snow or force game to congregate on their winter ranges. In some areas hunting seasons are extended in order to harvest the desired number of animals.

8. It cannot be stressed too strongly that the relatively few deer which were once year-long residents in ac-

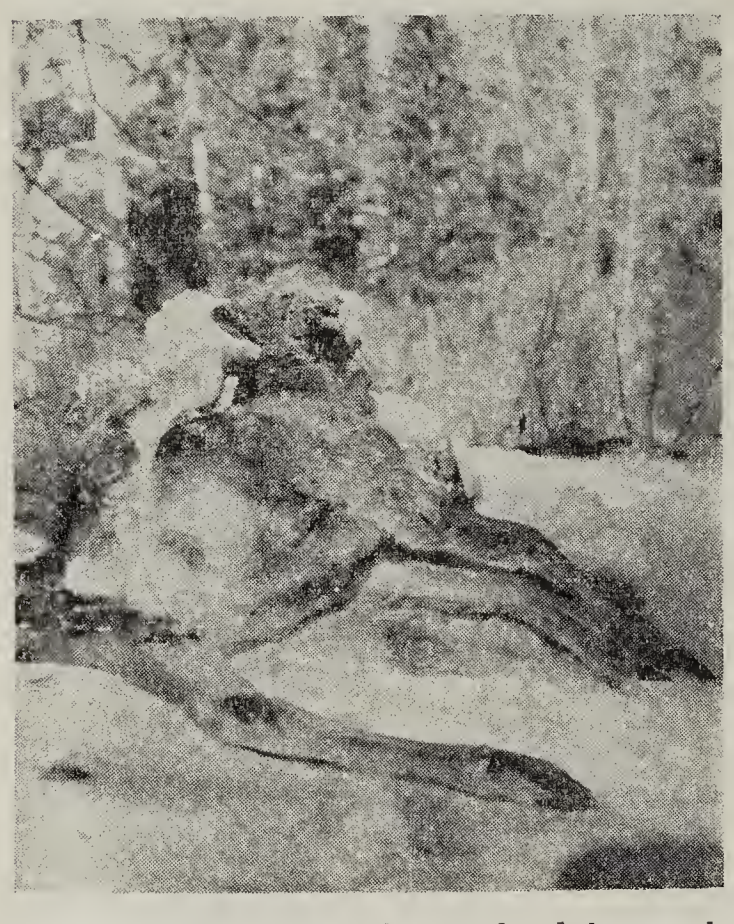
Checking station reports provide valuable information on hunter harvest.

cessible areas along roads were not a part of our manageable deer herd. It is impossible to have easy deer for roadside hunters without having over-populations of animals on the less accessible range areas where the bulk of the deer herd is carried.

9. Montana hunters enjoyed a bonanza hunting season in 1957. The 134,000 deer harvested were more than the number harvested in any other state. Resident hunter success on first deer was an unprecedented 86 percent and about one-third of the total hunters harvested a second deer. This marks the sixth year (since 1951) that both the number of deer harvested and the percent success of hunters have increased. The year 1951 saw the end of general buck seasons. Despite predictions that the shooting of females would harm deer herds, the yearly harvest has been tripled between 1951 and 1957. Where 39,000 bucks were harvested in 1951, about 90,000 bucks were harvested in 1957. The remaining one-third of the 1957 harvest was does and fawns. Over 12,000 elk were harvested in 1957. About one out of five elk hunters was successful. Approximately 35 percent of the harvest was bulls and 65 percent, cows and calves. Preliminary information shows that 1958 will again

be an outstanding year for Montana hunters. The number of deer and elk harvested will probably be similar to 1957.

10. Most Montana deer herds peaked in numbers from about 1948 through 1952. During this period, winter food supplies were severely overused and more animals were lost by starvation than were harvested.



Starved deer—a sign that a herd is not in balance with winter food supplies.

Despite the fact that we now have fewer deer, winter food supplies on many ranges are still critical. Deer populations will continue to decline where they are not in balance with their winter food supplies. Declines will be due to reduced fawn production and die-offs in severe winters rather than the harvest we have obtained with hunters. With our present regulations we can expect to harvest somewhat over 100,000 deer each year, but in the near future it will take more than roadside hunting to bag a deer.

11. Where deer are not in balance with their winter food supply, two deer either-sex seasons are needed for the best management. One deer either-sex seasons are recommended where food conditions are not critical. Montana now ranks as the leading deer producing state in the nation. With sound management we shall continue to lead and at the same time assure productive and healthy deer herds for the future.

12. The Montana Fish and Game Department proposes to change the date for deliberations on deer and elk seasons from March to June. This will allow full use of all information on hunter harvests, game population trends and game food conditions. This information is obtained over a period extending from December through May. Opening dates for deer and elk seasons will be established in February to permit people to plan hunting trips in advance, but closing dates and bag limits will be tentatively set in early June. After public review, final seasons will be set in early July and hunter maps will be distributed.

W. J. Everin
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Director

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